NEW
NICK CARTER
WEEKLY

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THE CURSE OF THE QUEXEL'S

OR THE GHOST OF A MURDERED BEAUTY

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

Instantly, without a word, Nick Carter leaped to his feet and dashed forward. But the apparition, as if devining his intention, seemed to fade backward into the grove and disappear.

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THE CURSE OF THE QUEXELS;

OR,

The Ghost of a Murdered Beauty.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE GHOST OF A WOMAN IN WAX.

Quintus Quexel seated himself in the reception room of Nick Carter's house to await the arrival of the detective, for Joseph, the valet, had just informed him that his master would not be long absent.

Quexel's face was very pale, and correspondingly handsome.

His features were set, and, to the ordinary observer, would have appeared hard and unsympathetic, notwithstanding the fact that his entire nature was exactly the opposite of such construction.

But, then, Quintus Quexel had lately undergone a most terrible strain.

He was the last and only male descendant of the Quexels—a family over which the awful curse of death by violence had hung for seventy years; a curse which had descended from one generation to another, beginning with and being the result of a misdeed of his father's father.

And this curse—this awful curse, which had pursued the Quexels since that time, had wrought, one by one, deeds of deliberate, premeditated assassination.

These murders, too, had inevitably been visited upon the innocent. They were committed at intervals of ten years, beginning with the year 1845, and following one another with almost the precise regularity of the equinoxial seasons.

In each case the victim had been the bride of a Quexel, and in each case the murder had been committed almost at the altar, while the object of them had been only too apparent.

Even the vendetta of the Corsicans had not the tenacity of this Quexel curse, for, in Corsica, the vendetta rarely outlives a generation, and almost never two of them.

But, in the case of the Quexels, the man who had

planned this extraordinary warfare had planned well. He had left the curse behind him, to grow and flourish after his death, and to pursue the Quexel family, not to the grave, but into oblivion.

It differed from most vendettas in the fact that the Quexels themselves were permitted to live on unharmed—unless through remorse and sorrow they were driven to suicide; but the women whom they married were accursed—murdered—in order that the family might become extinct.

No bride of a Quexel had been permitted to live until she could make that Quexel a father. None, that is, save the mother of Quintus, who had somehow escaped the family curse, and had been permitted to live to raise two children, Quintus and a daughter.

The last one to feel the weight of this awful fatality had been Quintus himself, for it was only one month this very morning, while he awaited the return of Nick Carter, since his own wife, a bride of only a few hours, had been mercilessly struck down while she was engaged in writing a letter in the cabin of his own private yacht.

It is true that Nick Carter had pursued and arrested the murderers—for there were two of them—and that, although only a month had elapsed since the commission of the crime, they had already been tried and convicted, and were now in the death house at Sing Sing, awaiting the day of execution.

Nevertheless, Quintus Quexel, who was not yet twenty-eight years old, believed that the curse remained undestroyed; and thereby hangs a short tale, which must precede the recital of the regular story which follows.

At Cedarmere, the Quexel mansion, on the banks of the Hudson, in an old wing of the house which had been sealed against all intrusion since the death of the grandfather, forty years ago, was found the secret of the curse.

Nick Carter and ex-Chief of Police Thomas Byrnes found it—and it had been a most astounding discovery.

In a secret room in that old wing, arranged as a shrine, reposed the waxen image, wrought in Paris, of the Mexican girl, Mercedes de Corona y Balmecedes by name, whom the old grandfather, when a young man, had loved and wronged by marrying her while he had another wife in his own country.

A waxen image of a wonderfully beautiful creature, reposing in a solid silver casket that was inlaid with gold and set with precious stones; a waxen image so lifelike and real that it seemed to beholders as if it were in reality a woman sleeping instead of the mere semblance of one; and inside an iron safe, and in an old desk in that deserted wing, was also discovered the history of old Aaron Quexel's wrongdoing.

And now we will come directly to the errand which brought Quintus Quexel to Nick Carter's house this particular morning.

The two men had not met since the trial and conviction of Antonio and Alvarado Balmecedes, now awaiting death for the murder of the bride, and the detective had been so busy with a multitude of other matters that he had scarcely thought of the Quexel case since; so now when he entered the room, and discovered who it was that was awaiting him, he expressed his surprise.

"Why, how do you do, Mr. Quexel?" he exclaimed. "I am really glad to see you. Come upstairs to my study and smoke a cigar with me while we talk."

Very little more save the ordinary commonplaces was said between them until they were seated opposite each other in the detective's study, and then Quexel remarked, very quietly:

"Mr. Carter, I have come back to you in reference to the old curse. I am very certain, in my own mind, that the ghost of that curse is not laid yet, but that it has returned to us in another form—or, to be explicit, in the form of the expression I have just used, if you can stretch your imagination far enough to give any credence whatever to a ghost."

"Is it possible?" said Nick, more by way of expressing his surprise than in the form of a question.

"It really seems so," was the reply. "I will admit that it does not sound probable, but that it is possible, or, at least, that it appears possible, I have my own senses to testify."

"To a ghost?"

"To something so like what is commonly called a ghost that we will call it by that name for want of a more fitting one."

"The ghost of whom? The ghost of what?"

"The ghost of the woman in wax, Mr. Carter."

The detective could hardly repress a smile.

The ghost of a woman in wax seemed to be preposterous on the face of it. The ghost of a woman of flesh and blood would have sounded more logical, but the ghost of a woman in wax was an innovation—for the woman in wax had not existed in the flesh since the early "forties."

"Tell me about it," he said, after a short pause.

"You recall the fact that, after the discoveries we made in the old wing of my house, I asked you to advise me about the disposition I should make of the wax figure in the coffin, and of the silver coffin itself?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember the advice you gave me?"

"Certainly. I advised you to destroy them; that is, to destroy the wax figure, and to have the casket melted and disposed of as bullion. Did you do it?"

"No; that is, I did part of it, but not all."

"Which is to say," said Nick, smiling, "that you were altogether too sentimental to destroy the beautiful waxen image, but that you did follow my advice in regard to the silver casket; is that the idea?"

"Yes."

"I thought so; I thought so at the time I gave you the advice. I did not for a moment believe that you would follow it, but I did think that whatever disposition you chose to make of it, that should remain your own affair. It was certainly none of my business."

"Well, I'll tell you, Carter, I could not get away from the idea that, whatever sins my grandfather committed, the woman in whose image that waxen figure was made committed no wrong."

"Certainly not."

"Or, if she did, it was only in that fact that she took her own life, having been driven to do so by his deception."

"Very true."

"It seemed to me that to destroy, ruthlessly, the perfect image of such a beautiful creature, who was, doubtless, as good and as pure as she was beautiful in life, was little short of sacrilege, even though the image were only made of wax. I could not bring myself to do it."

"I never for a moment thought that you would do so."

"Everything else I did cause to be destroyed—everything but that. The old wing I had torn down—utterly demolished, and now, where it once stood, I have built a conservatory for tropical and semitropical plants, mostly made up of Mexican products."

"Well?"

"The old furniture, decorations, carpets, rugs, paintings—everything—once contained in the old wing I had piled in a heap and burned."

"Even the contents of the room which we called the shrine?"

"Even that. Everything save the wax image of Mercedes de Corona."

"And what disposition did you make of that?"

"I had a rosewood casket made for it. I placed it inside as tenderly as if it were the genuine remains of a human being, and I caused it to be conveyed to our family mausoleum on the estate, and deposited in one of the niches there; and in front of it I ordered a marble slab upon which is inscribed:

"In Memory of One who was Bitterly Wronged—Mercedes de Corona y Balmecedes."

"Humph!" said the detective, and was silent.

"Did you know that my sister has returned from abroad?" asked Quexel, with an abrupt change of the subject, apparently.

"No; I was not aware of it."

"Alicia returned two weeks ago. She came back at once when she was informed of the misfortune that had befallen me. You know that she was to come aboard the yacht as soon as my wife and I arrived at a European port, if we had been permitted to carry out our plans. Now, Alicia is at home."

"Well?" said Nick. "All this has some bearing upon what you came here to tell me, has it not?"

"Certainly. It was my sister Alicia who first saw the ghost."

Nick Carter shrugged his shoulders, and Quexel added:

"I told you, Mr. Carter, that we would have to refer to it as a ghost, for want of a better term to apply to it. I am no more disposed to believe in ghosts than you are, but until some explanation can be found for the phenomenon I have come here to describe, 'ghost' is the only word which will individualize it."

"Very good. Your sister has seen it. How, and when, and where?"

"How? As we see all things. When? Frequently; several times. Where? In the new conservatory first; since then, in the house, and the grounds which surround the house."

"The ghost of Mercedes Corona, eh?"

"Yes; although she did not know about Mercedes Corona. I had told her nothing of the contents of the old wing, or of the history of her grandfather. My mother has told her nothing. She had, and has, never heard of the wax figure; and yet, when she came upon this apparition, if apparition it is, she described it so perfectly that I could make no mistake in the recognition. Later, when I saw it myself——"

"When you saw it yourself! Have you, then, seen it, surely and certainly?"

"I have seen it, as surely and as certainly as I see you at this moment, Mr. Carter; and, save for the costume, the apparition is as like the Mercedes Corona in wax, which you found in the old wing, as one drop of pure water is like another."

CHAPTER II.

SPIRIT, SPECTER OR WOMAN?

"That is rather an astounding assertion for a man to make," said the detective, slowly; "and there must somewhere be a plausible explanation for it. You say that it was your sister who first saw it?"

"Yes."

"And that at that time she knew nothing about the existence of the wax figure, or, in fact, did not know that it had ever existed at all?"

"Even now she is not aware that such a thing ever existed."

"So it is not possible that the apparition could have been the fruit of her imagination, is it?"

"Not at all. It would not be possible to so regard it, even if I had not received the assurance of my own senses concerning it."

"She returned, you say, two weeks ago?"

"Yes."

"When did she first see the apparition?"

"The third morning after her return."

"Morning? I thought that ghosts usually appeared in the nighttime."

"It is only during the day that my sister has seen it; my own experiences have been after darkness has fallen."

"Has it appeared to any other person or persons than you and your sister?"

"No."

"The third morning after her return to her home, Alicia saw the apparition, eh? Tell me about that incident, just as it came to your own knowledge. I want to know what was the first impression your sister had of it, and in what manner she announced it to you. Did she believe, at that time, that she had seen a ghost?"

"Not at all. She does not think so now."

"Well, tell me about it."

"I was seated in my own private lounging room, when Alicia came to me. It was a very warm morning, much the same as this morning, and the doors and windows were open. Alicia came directly into my lounging room, with merely an admonitory tap against the casing of the door as she approached.

"I looked up, with a smile, but I instantly saw that she was somewhat excited about something, and I said to her:

"'What is it, Alicia? What has happened?'

"'Quintus,' she replied, quite seriously—much too seriously for me to suppose that she was not in earnest—'who is the beautiful young woman who appears to be so much at home in your new conservatory, which was completed only the day before I came home?'

"'Eh?' I said; and then I told her that I did not know what she meant.

"'You are deceiving me,' she insisted. 'Is there an inmate of this house whom I know nothing about?'

"'Certainly not,' I told her; and then, bit by bit—for she was suspicious that I was deceiving her—she told me what had caused her remarks.

"She had gone into the conservatory to gather a few of the blossoms there, and, upon making a turn around one of the corners among the aisles, had come face to face with a young woman of extraordinary beauty, who, to all appearance, was about her own age.

"I asked her to describe the person she had seen, and the description she gave me was so entirely a description of the waxen figure in the silver casket that I was appalled, and my face showed my surprise and consternation.

"Alicia perceived this instantly, and she almost lost her temper.

"'You are deceiving me,' she asserted; and it required all my eloquence to convince her that I was not intentionally doing so.

"I repeat that the description was so perfectly a description of that wax woman in the casket that I recognized it instantly. The only difference was in the costume."

"And how was the apparition costumed?" asked the detective.

"Much the same, as far as I can determine, as any woman would be costumed during the morning of a hot summer day; in a gown of dimity lawn, white, of course, but relieved by little touches of color here and there; with a rose, plucked from one of the plants in the conservatory, glistening in her *coiffure;* with opals and turquoise gleaming at her throat and upon her fingers, and with a mantilla of black lace thrown carelessly across her shoulders, after the fashion of Mexican women."

"Humph!" said Nick. "Did they talk together?"

"Alicia cried out in surprise when she encountered the stranger, and then she exclaimed:

"'Who are you, please? And how did you come here?'

"To this the apparition made no reply; but she placed her fingers against her lips, as if to enjoin silence, and, turning, fled away through the aisles of the conservatory, disappearing at the first turn.

"It was not until then that Alicia thought of pursuing her, but, when the stranger disappeared, she ran after her swiftly.

"The aisle into which she had turned was a long one. There is no other turn from it for a considerable distance, but, nevertheless, the stranger had vanished."

"But not as ghosts usually vanish," said Nick. "This one ran away, instead of dissolving into nothingness before your sister's eyes, you see."

"Yes."

"Well, go on."

"I assured Alicia that I knew nothing about such a person, and that she must have imagined it, whereat she was angry."

"Naturally. People do not like to be told that they are mistaken about the evidence of their own eyesight."

"She charged me with knowing something about this mysterious woman, insisting that the expression of my face when first told about her was proof enough of that."

"Doubtless it was."

"Yes; I realized that at the time."

"What happened then?"

"Alicia insisted upon my telling her all about it, and I insisted that I was as ignorant as she was; and while we were still discussing the matter, my mother entered the room.

"I could not prevent Alicia from telling mother of the incident, but I did manage to make a signal, which she understood, and which conveyed to her my wish that she should appear not to recognize the likeness, for we had agreed together that my sister should never know about

the history of her grandfather, and of Mercedes de Corona."

"So your mother did not betray the truth?"

"Not at all. She remained as calm as I, save at the first instant of revelation, when her face expressed surprise, consternation and some degree of uneasiness, as mine had done."

"Which your sister detected, of course?"

"Certainly; and it naturally confirmed her in the opinion that we were purposely deceiving her."

"And the result of the interview was—what?"

"That my sister left the room unconvinced, vowing that, if we would not explain the mystery to her, she would find it out for herself."

"Well, what happened next in connection with the ghost?"

"The following morning, at about the same hour, Alicia saw it again."

"In the same place?"

"Approximately, the same—in the conservatory. She says herself that she went into the conservatory to look for the woman, but that she idled so long among the flowers that she forgot all about her errand, until suddenly the apparition stood before her.

"Alicia was plucking a flower at the time, and had just raised one of them to her nostrils to inhale the perfume, when it was snatched from her hand, and she started back, with a cry of fright, when she saw the same beautiful young woman gliding rapidly down the aisle.

"For a moment she was too astonished to move, and then she dashed after the figure, as she had done before; but, as before, it eluded her."

"And she came to you again with the story, as she had done before, eh?"

"Yes. But I could tell her no more than I had said on the first occasion; but I did promise her that I would investigate; and then a strange thing happened.

"Alicia was standing near one of the windows of my room while she was talking, and in the midst of our argument she suddenly cried out:

"'Quintus, come here! Look! Look yonder! Perhaps you will believe me now!'

"I had risen as she called to me, and hurried to the window.

"Alicia was pointing across the grounds toward a grove of firs, in which there is a summer house; but I was too slow in my motions, for, although Alicia insisted that she had seen the strange woman, and that she had disappeared in the grove, I saw nothing but the trees and the path through them by which Alicia said the ghost had disappeared."

"Did she speak of it as a ghost this time?"

"Oh, no, indeed. She referred to it as 'that woman!'"

"What did you do then?"

"I ran out of the house and into the grove as rapidly as I could, but I discovered nothing, nor did I find a trace which would indicate that any person had been there that morning.

"Now, Mr. Carter, Alicia had some such experiences as I have described every day after that. Sometimes she encountered the 'ghost' in the conservatory; at other times she saw it wandering about the grounds. Once she met it in the wide hall of the second floor of the mansion."

"What became of it then?"

"It turned and entered an open door that was near at hand, closing and locking the door as it passed through. Alicia strove in vain to open the door. She pounded upon it, and she called, but everything was silent beyond the door, and at last she ran to me again."

"Well?"

"Well, when I got there the door was not only unlocked, but it was open, and, of course, there was no sign of any stranger about.

"I shrugged my shoulders, not intending to insinuate that I doubted my sister's assertion at all, but she received it in that way, and now, for a time, she was so angry that she would scarcely speak to me."

"And all this time you yourself had not seen it at all?"

"No; I did not see it until that very day of her encounter in the hall; but at the close of that day—in fact, just after darkness had fallen—I started for the stable, to give some directions to my hostler. Then I saw it."

"Where?"

"Near the same clump of fir trees where it had disappeared on one occasion before."

"What did you do?"

"I took after it, of course."

"And caught it?"

"I came up to it."

"You came up to it? Within reach of it, do you mean?"

"Almost."

"And you did not catch it?"

"No."

"Were you frightened?"

"I was awed; I cannot deny it."

"By what?"

"By what I saw. Carter, if that woman in wax could have stepped out of the silver casket and stood before us, filled with life and animation, she would have appeared exactly as this woman did whom I overtook at the entrance to the grove. She did not make any effort to escape from me, for when she saw, or heard, me approaching her, she merely turned and waited, and then, as I came nearer, she raised one hand as if to warn me off, and uttered the one word, 'Stop!'"

"And you stopped, eh?"

"Yes, I did. I could not have helped obeying her if my life had depended upon it. I halted, and then, after

gazing at me sorrowfully for a moment, the specter, or ghost, or woman—whatever it is—turned and disappeared among the trees."

CHAPTER III.

THE TERRORS OF A VENDETTA.

"Did you pursue it?" asked the detective.

"Pursue it? No."

"Why not?"

"I could not! I could not!"

"Why?"

"I couldn't have moved to have saved my life. I doubt if you could have done so had you been there in my place."

"I should, at least, have tried, Quexel."

"I know that I did wrong to permit the woman to escape—or ghost, if it were a ghost; but when I came face to face with it, when it ordered me to halt, and when I saw what appeared to be the woman of the casket standing before me alive, I was appalled."

"It is not surprising that you were."

"You know how things will rush in a flood across one's recollections, don't you?"

"Certainly."

"Well, in that instant it seemed to me that I remembered all that terrible story of my grandfather, as told in the diary we read together; it seemed, also, that I remembered my own Janice, and the terrible fate that had befallen her because of my grandfather's sin, committed so many years before she was born, and I was paralyzed. I could not have moved hand or foot if I had tried, and I doubt if I tried.

"I must have stood there ten minutes before I turned away, and then I made my way back slowly toward the house."

"I think I can thoroughly appreciate your feelings, Mr. Quexel," said the detective, kindly.

"Perhaps you can; possibly not. I don't think that I quite understand them myself. But I have not finished with that incident yet."

"Continue, then."

"As I returned slowly toward the house, I encountered my sister coming rapidly toward me. She had been at the window of her own room, and had seen me at the entrance to the grove. She had also seen the apparition in front of me, and I suppose from that distance we must have appeared to be conversing."

"I understand."

"At all events, she accused me of it. She insisted that she had seen me talking with the strange woman. I could not pacify her, or make her believe that I knew nothing about the matter, notwithstanding that I admitted that I had, indeed, seen the woman, and was as much mystified as Alicia.

"But even that is not all."

"What more?"

"The same thing happened again last evening."

"Tell me about that occurrence."

"You see, several days had elapsed without either Alicia or I having seen the woman again, but last evening—it must have been nearly nine o'clock—I was walking around the grounds alone, smoking a cigar, when suddenly I found myself close to the entrance of the same grove.

"I stopped there, remembering the last occasion when I had stood on that very spot, and I was on the point of beating a retreat, when the woman suddenly appeared before me.

"She stood just at the entrance, between the trees, and she was dressed in white, as I have already described her appearance to you.

"Carter, a more wondrously beautiful creature never existed in flesh and blood. Her beauty is indescribable, even if it is uncanny and unreal.

"Just as on that other occasion when I encountered her, I seemed to be rendered incapable of motion, and, what is stranger still, I seemed to have no desire to move. I stood as I was and where I was, listlessly, immovable—and she seemed to realize that she was in no danger of an attack from me.

"She smiled—and I have never seen a sweeter smile; but her eyes were sad—so sad that it seemed almost as if there were tears in them."

"You did not attempt to advance toward her?" asked Nick.

"No; I could not. I was as if rooted to the spot."

"And then—— What happened then?"

"She shrank back a step or two further away from me, so that she was almost hidden among the trees, although I could see her white dress and the gleam of her matchless eyes through the darkness. And then she spoke to me."

"Spoke to you?"

"Yes; and mortal man has never heard such a voice before—so low, so sweet, so filled with sad, sweet music that it is almost in a minor key."

"What did she say?"

"I am coming to that.

"'Quintus Quexel,' she said, 'I am sorry for you. You have had much to bear, much suffering to endure, and through no fault of your own. Believe me, if it were in my power to spare you further sorrow, I would do so; but I cannot—I cannot!'

"'Who are you?' I demanded. 'Tell me that.'

"'No,' she replied, 'I cannot tell you; but do you not know?'

"'I know who it is that you resemble,' I replied. 'Are you spirit, specter, or a woman?'

"I thought I heard a low laugh when I asked that question, but it was instantly followed by her reply.

"'I am all three,' she said, solemnly. 'I am the spirit of one who is now almost forgotten; I am the specter of a dead past, and I am a woman who has a terrible duty to perform, a terrible oath to fulfill, and an awful obligation to confer. I am sorry for you, Quintus Quexel, but I am none the less your enemy, and the enemy of your house, so beware of me!'

"'But why?' I demanded. 'Why?'

"'Some day you may know,' she said. 'Some day you may know; but not now.'

"I had cast my eyes down while she was speaking, and, when I raised them again to ask her another question, she was gone."

"What did you do then?" asked the detective.

"I returned to the house and procured a lantern. I did not light it until after I had taken it to the grove and was well among the trees; but then I did so, and I searched that grove as thoroughly as it could be searched."

"And found—what?"

"Nothing."

"Nor any sign of the woman's presence?"

"I found no sign of her whatever."

"So now you have come to me."

"Yes, Mr. Carter, now I have come to you."

"What is your own opinion about this matter, Quexel?"

"I am afraid that I haven't any."

"But you must have some sort of an opinion."

"If I have, it is all included in the statement that I think we are not yet rid of the curse."

"You don't take any stock in the unreality of this thing, do you?"

"I don't know exactly what you mean."

"You don't really believe that you have seen and talked with a ghost, do you?"

"No—and yet——"

"And yet what?"

"I can hardly believe in the reality of the woman, either."

"Quintus Quexel, you may safely believe one of two things. Either it is a live woman, in flesh and blood, whom you have seen and conversed with, or your mind has become unsettled."

"I have thought of that," replied Quexel, quietly and seriously; "but, you see, there is one powerful objection to such a theory as the latter one, and that is that my sister saw the apparition before I did."

"That is quite true, and I did not forget that act when I made the remark just now. It merely proves that it is a woman in flesh and blood."

"But how, Mr. Carter, do you account for the likeness to the wax woman?"

"I don't account for it. I don't pretend to do so; but that does not alter the self-evident fact that there is a way to account for it, even though we do not know what it is at the present moment."

"And, again, how is it possible that an utter stranger—for if it is a woman, she must be an utter stranger, since she has never been seen about the place before now—how is it possible for her to be so familiar with my home—Cedarmere?"

"That is another question which cannot be answered now."

"And how can any woman appear and disappear so suddenly? There is something uncanny about the whole affair—something which you must solve for me. I cannot do it myself. Will you undertake it, Mr. Carter?"

"Certainly I will undertake it. Have you told me everything she said to you?"

"Yes; every word."

"Well, you have already described what a sweet voice she possesses; now, tell me if there was not a suggestion of foreign accent in that voice?"

"Did I not tell you that there was?"

"No; you forgot to mention it if you noticed such a thing."

"Oh, I did notice it, plainly."

"In that case, don't you think it is more than probable that this may be another Balmecedes?"

"I had not thought of that."

"Remember that the original Balmecedes of whom we know was the young woman in whose likeness the wax figure was made; remember that it was a Balmecedes who wrote the letter to your grandfather, informing him that a vendetta had been sworn against him; remember that the two men now awaiting death at Sing Sing are Balmecedes, and that both are young men."

"Yes, I remember."

"Have you ever known people who believe in the swearing of the oath of vendetta?"

"Never."

"Do you know what such an oath is like?"

"I have no idea."

"I will tell you."

"I wish you would do so."

"First, you must understand that the oath of vendetta is never taken save among people who believe in it as religiously as they believe in God; and that the oath, once taken, binds the children and the children's children for generation after generation. I have already told you that, even in Corsica, such things do not outlast a generation or two, but that is because the vendetta works so thoroughly that, after a lapse of time, there are no responsible parties to the vendetta left to carry it on. They have all been killed.

"Now, Quexel, the vendetta is almost as unknown in Mexico as it is here, and yet there are certain old families

there who have preserved their traditions through centuries, who do believe in it, worship it, and exalt it.

"The family of Balmecedes, I take it, is such a family.

"Through seventy years their oath of vengeance against the Quexels has never been allowed to grow cold, has it?"

"It certainly has not."

"Now, the oath of vendetta includes the entire family. If the sons are killed, the daughters, if there are any, are obliged to assume the responsibility.

"For example, suppose that these two young men now in Sing Sing are the last male descendants of the Balmecedes family, and that they have a sister. Their arrest, trial and conviction renders them the same as if they were dead, and the responsibility of the oath then falls to the sister. Suppose, again, that, after two generations, there should have been born another Balmecedes girl, who is an exact reproduction of the Mercedes of the wax figure, eh?

"Nothing is more likely than both of these suppositions; and it is on that idea that we must work. But I see that you have not completed your story. What more have you to tell me?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE SECRET OF THE HOUSE.

"What more have you to tell me?" repeated the detective.

"I have nothing more to tell," replied Quexel. "Really, I have told you all."

"The apparition has attempted no act of violence, I hope?"

"N-no."

"Why do you appear to hesitate in giving that answer?"

"Because, somehow, I fear for my sister."

"Why? And how?"

"I do not know either the why or the wherefore, Carter. Call it an intuition, if you will do so."

"Intuitions belong to women. You have a reason. What is it?"

"Alicia is the only female child that has been born into the family since the beginning of the curse."

"Yes."

"Did you not understand that terrible letter to read that, although a Quexel would never suffer bodily harm, that although the vengeance would be visited upon the women who became brides of Quexels, that daughters of the family, if there should be any, would be murdered before they could bear children?"

"Yes."

"Then, in that case, is not my sister in danger?"

"I do not think so, unless she happens to be contemplating marriage."

"She is not promised to any man—or, at least, if she is, I do not know it. But why should this woman appear to Alicia first? Why should she not have come direct to me?"

"I think," replied Nick, slowly, "that that is not the question we should ask at all. The question is, why should she have appeared at all?"

"To threaten me," said Quexel.

"Say, rather, to warn you."

"To warn?"

"Ay, to warn. Here is a young woman, we will say, who has been reared in an atmosphere of revenge—of vengeance. She has been taught from the cradle to regard the carrying out of the oath of vendetta taken by her family against yours as a holy cause. She sees her brothers depart on their errand, which is to carry death, through murder, into your family, and she wishes them Godspeed. She knows no other law—no other rule of justice.

"But their errand is not accomplished, as they would have had it.

"The brothers are apprehended, they are tried for murder, they are convicted, and ultimately they will sit in the electric chair to pay the penalty of their crime.

"Then the onus of the obligation falls upon her. She has taken the oath, her brothers have failed, and now she must act.

"That is the manner in which I read it all, Quintus.

"The oath under which she will act is inexorable, but she is a woman, and she is not given to the performance of deeds of violence.

"There, my friend, that is as far as I care to go in mere guesswork; but that there is some foundation for truth in what I have said, you must admit."

"Yes, I do admit it. I see it now. She appeared to us to warn us. Now, Carter, tell me, what shall I do?"

"I will think over a reply to that question while we are on our way to Cedarmere."

"Ah! Are you going home with me, then?"

"Certainly I am. I wish to see this 'ghost,' if such a thing is possible; and I think in the way I shall arrange it, it will be."

The detective and Quintus Quexel arrived at Cedarmere at half-past four that afternoon, for they did not leave the city at once when Nick determined that he would return with his client.

The Quexel carriage was awaiting them at the station, and they were driven rapidly to the mansion.

The detective had not seen the place since the changes already described had been made, but he acknowledged at once that a great improvement had been wrought.

The old, unsightly wing had disappeared, and in its place was raised up a magnificent, as well as a huge, conservatory.

Alicia Quexel was seated under the spreading branches

of a tree, reading a book, when the two men arrived, and she rose and came forward at once to meet Nick Carter.

By Nick's advice, nothing whatever concerning his profession was said to her; she merely understood that the Mr. Carter to whom she was introduced was an old and valued friend of her brother—and that was sufficient, for Nick saw at once that she was devoted to Quintus, no matter how angry or petulant she may have appeared to be about the unknown woman who insisted upon haunting the household.

While they were driving through the spacious grounds, Quintus had pointed out to the detective the grove to which he had referred as the place where he had twice seen entered the mysterious woman, and Nick determined that he would investigate it alone at the first opportunity.

They left the carriage near the spot where Alicia was seated, and stood there talking to her, while the vehicle went on its way to the stables.

Then Quintus took Nick's satchel from him, saying, as he did so:

"You can remain here, where it is cool, and chat with Alicia, while I send this to your room. I'll be back in a moment."

Thus it was that he went away, and left his sister alone with the detective.

"Quintus has been relating an extraordinary tale to me," he said, laughing, as soon as they were alone.

"About the beautiful woman?" asked Alicia.

"Yes; is she really so beautiful? I regarded his statements as to that part of it as merely masculine enthusiasm."

"I never saw any person so beautiful," replied Alicia, seriously. Then she raised her head suddenly, and said:

"I would be glad, Mr. Carter, if you would talk with Quintus seriously about this matter. It is possible that you may make some impression upon him where I fail to do so."

"I don't think I quite understand you," said Nick.

"Has Quintus ever told you the secret of this house?" she inquired, lowering her voice so that it scarcely reached the ears of the detective.

"The secret of the house?" he repeated after her, puzzled more than he cared to admit. "I am sure that now I do not understand you at all."

"I see that he has not told you. Perhaps I may do so later—that is, if you will consent to talk to him as he should be talked to."

"Why, as for that, I will consent now, if you will tell me what you mean by the request."

"I mean in regard to that woman."

"That he says that the woman is a ghost."

"A ghost!"

"Such is the significance of the story he told me."

"He knows better! He knows better!"

"If not a ghost, then," said the detective, feeling his way with great care, "who and what is she?"

"She is not a ghost, at least. You don't mean to tell me, sir, that you believe in ghosts?"

"No, I do not; but I had decided that Quintus does."

"Then Quintus has deceived you, as he has endeavored to deceive me."

"Do you believe that he has tried to deceive you?"

"I know it."

"May I ask how you know it?"

"I know it by the evidence of my eyes and ears; by the use of my supply of common sense; by the adaptation of a little reason to explain circumstances which I could not understand. I know it for the same reason that I know you are now wondering if I will let you smoke while you are talking out here with me—because——"

Nick laughed outright.

"You are, at least, right about that," he said, taking a cigar from his pocket; "and you perceive that I know your answer before you give it, and, accordingly, I light a cigar. But, Miss Quexel, if you wish me to remonstrate with your brother—and before we go further, I will tell you that I am willing to do so if you will convince me that such a proceeding would be wise—if you wish me to remonstrate with him, you must first tell me all you know about the matter."

"I am quite willing to do that."

"And about that secret to which you just referred—you called it the secret of the house."

"Yes."

"Well, I am ready to hear it all," he said, smiling.

"Quintus is returning now. We will talk together for a few moments, and then I will ask you to go with me to see my favorite horse. I will tell you then, for I do not wish Quintus to know that you and I have secrets together so soon."

"Very well," replied Nick, smiling.

It was half an hour later when Alicia suggested that she would like to show their guest her favorite hunter, and, when Quintus would have accompanied them, she called back at him that he was not wanted.

She did it laughingly, so that she appeared to be half in jest and half in earnest, and she succeeded in giving her brother the impression—as she wished to do—that she had found this new friend sufficiently interesting to desire his company for a time to herself; and Quintus was quite content to slip down into his garden chair and close his eyes, while he awaited their return.

"Now," said Nick, as soon as they were out of hearing from the brother, and in a half-bantering tone, which was intended to convey that he did not take the situation too seriously—"now for the hatching of our little plot, eh?"

"You will discover that it is quite a grave matter I have to discuss," she replied.

"That remark sounds ominous," said Nick.

"It is ominous. Everything about this place is ominous just now. It begins with the awful murder of Quintus' wife."

"Well?" said Nick, not knowing what else to say just then, for he had no idea how much this girl of twenty knew, and therefore no knowledge whatever of how much of his own knowledge he might admit to her during their conversation. But, as she remained silent after his interjection, he added:

"We were to talk about the ghost, were we not?"

"There is no ghost," she said, somewhat coldly; "but there is a beautiful woman."

"Very well; about the beautiful woman, then."

"Yes, we were to talk about her, and about the secret of the house, and about Quintus."

"You said that you had seen——" began Nick, but she interrupted him, as he hoped she would do.

"I have seen the woman many times," she said; "oftener than Quintus knows. I have talked with her—under very adverse circumstances, to be sure; but still I have talked with her. I know that she is flesh and blood, and I am positive that she is in love with Quintus."

"In—love—with—Quintus!" said Nick, slowly, so surprised at the statement that he permitted himself to show it.

"Yes," was the reply. "She is in love with Quintus, and, strange as it may seem to you, for the reason that his wife, whom he loved, has only been dead a month, I believe that he is in love with her." She paused, to give effect to her statement, and then continued:

"Wait; let me finish what I was about to say. He has a portrait of her—a miniature, I should say, painted on ivory, delicately and beautifully done. He has talked with her almost [illegible] that grove of firs—three times, to my certain knowledge——"

"Three times?"

"Yes, three. I have seen him each time. And now comes the strangest part of all. I know where she lives—[illegible] the place herself away, and he thinks that I do not know it."

"Where is it?" asked Nick. "Where does this woman hide herself away?"

"That, sir, is a part of the secret of the house to which I referred, and, if you will listen, I will tell you about it."

CHAPTER V.

A STEP TOWARD THE MYSTERY.

They stopped and seated themselves upon a garden [illegible] which was half concealed beneath a bower of [illegible].

"[illegible] is as good a place as any for our conversation," [illegible].

"Yes," agreed the detective; "and you were to tell me about the secret of the house."

"It is a secret," Alicia continued, in a half-musing tone, "which Quintus has no idea that I am familiar with, and I assure you that I became possessed of it quite by accident."

"But what is it?" asked Nick.

"I am coming to it, Mr. Carter; but you must permit me to do so in my own way."

"Certainly. I will try not to interrupt again."

"You, of course, are familiar with something of the history of my grandfather?" she asked, to the detective's great astonishment, for he had no idea that she was familiar with it herself, and it was evident that she was not when she continued—that, in fact, she referred merely to his eccentricities and peculiarities as he became an old man. "I have no doubt that Quintus has told you what a strange old man he was. He died a great many years ago."

"Forty years ago, to be exact," said Nick.

"Yes. My father used to tell me about him, and as a child I was never so delighted as when I could get my father alone and get him to talk about grandpa; and I really think that he told me much more about the old man, at one time and another, than he ever told my brother.

"The part of the story which I used to tease him to tell me was one to which he inadvertently referred one day, and after that I would never let him rest about it. Wasn't it the Duke of Portland who built a secret palace underground, Mr. Carter? A palace which remained a mystery until after his death?" she asked, with an apparently sudden change of subject.

"Yes," replied Nick.

"And the old duke lived under two identities, did he not?"

"I believe so."

"Well, sir, my grandfather did very much the same thing."

Nick Carter was honestly surprised now, although he did not manifest it in any way. Instead, he thought it was better for him to appear somewhat incredulous, and so, with a light laugh of incredulity, which was not offensive, however, he asked:

"Are you quite sure?"

"Sure? Certainly. Also, I can prove it, if necessary."

"Is that the secret of the house?" asked Nick. "An underground palace?"

"No, it is not a palace; it is more like a dungeon, I fancy."

"You fancy? Then you have not seen it?"

"I have never had the courage to enter it alone; that is the only reason."

"But you are positive about its existence?"

"Certainly. I have been as far as the entrance. I have

even crossed into the interior, and proceeded a few steps into the darkness and mystery beyond."

"This is very interesting," said Nick.

"I thought you would find it so."

"Am I to understand that your brother also knows about the secret of the house? Or, at least, that you believe he knows about it?"

"Of course. My father always talked about matters of the family with Quintus more than he did with me. It is not at all likely that he would leave him in ignorance of something which he frequently discussed with me."

"I don't know about that," said the detective; "and I hardly think that your brother is aware of this secret place."

"Nonsense! Where, then, does he hide the beautiful woman?"

"Do you really think that she is here with his connivance, Miss Quexel?"

"I am sure of it."

"Why so?"

"I will reply to your question by asking another. How could she be here without it?"

The detective shook his head.

"I think you are wrong," he said.

"But I have seen him with her. I have seen him talking with her. I have watched them, and he has made no effort to seize her, as he would have done had he regarded her in the same light that I do."

"Let us drop that branch of the subject for a moment, and return to your grandfather," said Nick.

"Yes. Well?"

"A moment ago you referred to his history. How much of that history do you know about?"

"Very little, I suppose; but enough to have convinced me that he was not a good man; or that some secret burden rested on his soul; or that he had committed some wrong act in his past which had cast a shadow over his life; or—that he was crazy."

"And that is all?"

"Yes; you see, it is mostly conjecture. There is very little fact to go by in what I know, isn't there?"

"Very little, indeed. Now, tell me how much you have been told about the secret of the house."

"This: My great-grandfather purchased this tract of land many years ago. A part of it descended to my grandfather. Later, he purchased back again that part of it which his father had disposed of and some other land in addition, until he owned something like two thousand acres in this locality.

"The old house which my great-grandfather built stood on the present site as this one, but it was destroyed in some mysterious manner when my grandfather was a child. Little, much of it was rebuilt.

"I do not know the exact story about it, for I gleaned it only in snatches from my father at such times as I could induce him to talk about it; but it appears that, after my grandfather returned from the Mexican War, he imported a good many workmen from Europe, who were employed on the place. It was the foreign workmen who built the underground establishment, who made the secret passages in the old house, and who did all that sort of work which my grandfather desired nobody in this country but himself should know about.

"When their work was finished, they were paid off and sent back to their own country. That, sir, is the true story of the origin of the 'secret of the house.'"

"But I have been told," remonstrated Nick, "that the house, as it now stands, is almost entirely new; that it has been, in effect, rebuilt since the death of your grandfather. If that is true, how does it happen that the secret has not been discovered?"

"It is true, and it is not true. That is a seeming paradox, but it is a fact. The foundations of the house remain the same now that they have always been. The old partitions are the same, so far as it stands upon the ground occupied by the old-time mansion. They were—the foundations and the partition—of such solid masonry that it was deemed best not to disturb them, and the plans of the newer part of the building were drawn in conformity with them."

"I understand you now."

"It was the same with the stable. That stable looks new, but it is really the oldest of all the buildings here."

"And the old wing, which has just been torn down and replaced by a conservatory? What of that?"

"The old wing was built after the other things I have mentioned were done. The old wing had nothing to do with the underground part of the establishment."

"But I am to understand that the stable had something to do with it—and still has?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea of the extent of this underground mystery?"

"None whatever. I merely know that there is such a place. All that I do know is that there is a tunnel from it to the shore of the river, and——"

"To the shore of the Hudson River?"

"Yes. I am afraid, Mr. Carter, that my ancestors were not all that they should have been in matters of morality and strict probity. There was, doubtless, some sort of contraband trade carried on by them, and the underground vaults—or whatever they are—and the tunnel to the river were built to accommodate that trade."

"Very likely. But we need not go into that."

"No."

"And it is your belief that this strange woman, whom you have encountered so many times, and whom Quintus regards as a ghost, is in hiding in that underground residence?"

"Yes."

"You say that you know where the entrance to it is located?"

"I know where one of the entrances is located; but there are many which I do not know about."

"How did you find out about this one?"

"By an accident. Shall I show it to you?"

"Can you do so without fear of being seen? It is daylight now, remember."

"I can show you, easily enough. We are not a hundred feet from it at this moment. In fact, I should judge by the direction of your eyes that you are looking almost directly at it at this moment."

They were seated so that they faced the mansion, on the side opposite the conservatory, and so Nick Carter instantly replied:

"It is on the outside of the house, then? In the foundation?"

"Yes."

"Will you show it to me?"

She left her seat, without another word, and walked slowly toward the house, for they were so hidden among the trees and shrubs that they were out of view from any chance observers.

Nick Carter followed her, and presently she stopped within a few feet of the foundation.

"I used to be very fond of canary birds," she said, "and there was a time when I kept many of them, and made great pets of them. One day, when I was little more than a mere child, one of my favorites got away from me and flew out of the window, very early in the morning. I threw some kind of a wrap around me and hurried down the stairs and out of the house in pursuit of it.

"I came upon it just about here, Mr. Carter, and in my efforts to catch it I stumbled and fell.

"It is more than likely that I would have dashed out my brains against the solid stone of the foundation, for I was running very fast at the time, had I not put out my hands to protect me. As it was, I received a blow sufficient to deprive me of my senses for a time, although, strangely enough, I was not much hurt; but, when I recovered sufficient to observe my surroundings, that stone there—the largest one in the foundation anywhere near us—was out of place.

"It had swung partly open, and I could see past it into intense darkness.

"At first I was badly frightened, but, the more I looked, the more interested I became, and presently I began to investigate the phenomenon.

"It required very little wit on my part to discover that in falling, my hand had come in contact with a spring, or catch, which had released the stone, and that it had swung partly open."

She stepped forward and laid one hand upon an indentation in the stone of the size and shape of a hen's egg, and then turned to him, with a smile.

"You have but to press in the center of this indentation," she said, "to cause the huge stone to move. It is hung on a pivot, somehow, and is so nicely balanced that no strength is required to operate it. And now, sir, that I have shown it to you, will you investigate it while you are here?"

"I shall do so this very night," replied Nick. "I am more than glad that you have told me about it; very glad, also, that you have told no other person, and very sure now that you will not tell anybody else about it until I give you leave."

"You may be sure that I will not."

"Then I will promise to have much of this mystery solved for you before to-morrow morning, Miss Quexel," said Nick.

CHAPTER VI.

STOLEN AWAY IN THE DARK.

After dinner that evening Nick Carter and Quintus Quexel walked alone together in the garden, to enjoy their cigars, and, after they had conversed on indifferent topics for a little time, the detective suddenly asked his companion:

"Did I understand you to tell me that you have seen the 'ghost' only three times?"

Quexel started a little, and then, with some hesitation, he replied:

"As a matter of fact, I have seen her three times, although I think I told you only of two."

"May I ask why you did not tell me about the other?" asked Nick.

"I kept it to myself only because I was ashamed to tell you about it."

"Why so?"

"Because I feel that I should have made an effort to capture her, and thus to have solved the mystery. My reluctance arose merely from a desire to conceal what you might be disposed to call cowardice on my part."

"Where did the third interview take place?"

"At the same place. At the entrance to this grove we are now approaching."

"And was it, in effect, the same as the other interviews you have described?"

"Yes."

"You talked with the woman?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me what was said?"

"I begged her to tell me who she was, how she came here, where she concealed herself, and why she persisted in haunting this house and these grounds."

"And what did she reply?"

"The same as she had done before, that it was not in her power to tell me more than she had already done."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, that is all."

"Quintus, did you ever hear that there is an underground establishment connected with your house?"

Quintus Quexel gazed at the detective in genuine surprise.

"No," he said; "I have never heard of such a thing."

"Not from your father?"

"I repeat that I have never heard of such a thing. Why do you ask?"

"Because I think that I have very good reason to suppose that such a place does exist."

"Underneath this house of mine?"

"Yes."

"It is hardly probable, is it?"

"Perhaps not; but I mean to make an investigation before morning dawns, and I may be able to tell you more about it by that time."

"Shall you do it alone, or take me with you?"

"I think now that I would prefer to go alone. To be candid with you, I know a little about the place already, only you must not ask me just how I know. I shall not begin my search until after midnight. Shall we sit down and finish our cigars?"

The detective indicated a bench that was close beside them, and at the same time settled himself upon it.

They were seated so that they faced the grove where the apparition had so often been seen, and were, perhaps, a hundred feet away from it.

"That is the point, is it not," asked the detective, "where you have seen the mysterious woman three times?"

"Yes."

"And she always appears just inside——"

The detective stopped abruptly, for Quexel had seized his arm in a convulsive grasp, and was pointing, with trembling fingers, with his other hand toward the grove.

"See!" he exclaimed, in a half whisper. "There she is now!"

The detective looked and saw.

A white figure, unmistakably the strange woman about whom they were so concerned, appeared in the opening of the path which led toward the center of the grove.

Instantly, without a word, the detective leaped to his feet and dashed forward.

But the apparition, as if divining his intention, seemed to flit backward into the grove, and the very instant that Nick Carter started toward her she disappeared.

For a single pause.

Swiftly he ran to the entrance and dashed in among the trees; and then, for a full half hour, he searched every where among the firs, but without finding the slightest trace of the woman in white.

After a little, he returned to Quexel, who had not left the bench at all, but who sat there awaiting the detective's return.

"I will have to make a search of that place in the daytime," said the detective. "It is impossible to find anything there now, in this light."

"At least, you have seen her with your own eyes," said Quexel, quietly.

"If you mean by that that you suppose I have for a moment doubted her existence, you are mistaken," said Nick.

"No, I did not mean that. But, Carter, can she be really a mortal woman, and disappear, even out of your reach, so easily?"

"Of course she is a mortal woman, man!"

"Then, how——"

"You don't mean to tell me that you are getting to the point where you are beginning to believe in ghosts, do you?"

"I begin to believe that this apparition is not mortal."

"Nonsense, Quintus!"

"How does she disappear as she does—tell me that?"

"She has a means of eluding us, and she elects to appear only where that means is ready to hand, that is all. To-morrow, by daylight, I shall take measures to find it."

"And you think you can do so?"

"I haven't a doubt of it."

Quexel sighed, but it was plain that he had no confidence in the ability of the detective to do as he promised."

"Shall we return to the house?" he suggested, after a moment.

"Yes," replied Nick; and they rose and walked back to the broad veranda, where Alicia and her mother were seated.

It was about half an hour later when Alicia left the hammock in which she was seated and went down the broad steps to the lawn.

"Where are you going?" asked her mother.

"Just here in the moonlight, that is all," she replied.

Nick felt impelled to follow and keep her company, but he did not do so, for the reason that Mrs. Quexel was at that moment addressing her remarks directly to him, and he could not well leave.

But he kept the young woman in view as she strolled across the grass, seeming purposely to avoid the paths, and presently he saw that she had seated herself where he and Quintus had rested a few minutes before, when he had seen the mysterious woman.

After a little, Quintus remarked that he had some views he wished to show him, and he asked Nick to step into the library with him, and, although loath to leave the quiet and the quietness of the veranda, Nick complied.

They were inside the house about half an hour, when they returned to the veranda, only to find that Mrs. Quexel and her daughter had both disappeared.

"They have gone to their rooms," said Quexel, looking at his watch. "Did you realize that it was so late, Carter?"

"What time is it?"

"Almost eleven. Do you feel like turning in?"

"Not at all; but you can, at any time you please, without regard to me. In fact, I prefer that you should leave me here on the veranda, alone, when you do get ready to go, although there is no reason why you should hasten."

"Oh, well, I may as well go now. I don't feel overwell to-night. You know the way to your room?"

"Certainly; and say, Quintus."

"Well?"

"Send the servants to bed, will you? And give me your latchkey. Thank you. Now, go in and close the house, just as if I were already in bed, and be good enough to forget all about me, I'm going to do a little watching out here, a little thinking, and possibly a little exploring, also."

"You're a queer chap, Carter. What do you expect to find out here?"

"Thoughts in plenty, if nothing else. Just do as I said, will you?"

"Yes."

"I shall probably sit where I am for an hour or two before I move at all, and I may sit here, or near here, all night. This hammock is very comfortable, and the air is delicious to-night. Good-night, Quintus."

"Good-night, Carter."

The door closed behind him, and he was gone.

Fifteen minutes later, just as the detective was beginning to get his thoughts shaped into systematic form, the door behind him opened suddenly, and Mrs. Quexel appeared.

Nick rose to meet her, and perceived at once that she appeared perturbed about something.

"Is it you, Mr. Carter?" she asked.

"Yes; I was enjoying the cool night out here a little later than Quintus cared to do," he replied.

"Where is Alicia?"

"Your daughter? Did she not go into the house with you?"

"No; I have not seen her since she walked to the grove, before you and Quintus went to the library together."

"Has she not gone into the house?"

"She is not in her room, and she has not been there," replied the mother.

"Have you looked elsewhere for her?"

"I have looked in the library, in her own room, and she has not been to mine. If she had returned to the house I would have seen her. She never retires without bidding me good-night."

The detective turned his head toward the grove, but he saw in that glance that the bench near the entrance was vacant.

"Wait here, Mrs. Quexel," he said. "I will see if I can find her."

He ran down the steps and crossed the lawn hastily.

When he arrived there, he discovered on the ground beside the bench a white worsted hood which Alicia had worn over her head and a fan she had carried in her hand. On the grass in front of the bench was a rose which he remembered that she had carried in her hand, but now it was trampled into the sod as if some person had put a heavy foot upon it.

The petals were torn and dirty, and the rose itself was thoroughly crushed, and as Nick Carter picked it up to examine it, he realized at once that a third party had been there.

"Alicia has been attacked," was the thought that flashed across his mind instantly, and at once he glanced toward the grove for an explanation of this new mystery.

Then he looked back again toward the house, and discovered that Mrs. Quexel had followed him, and that a few paces behind her was Quintus, hurrying toward him.

He met them both halfway, and, very quietly, he said:

"Miss Quexel has disappeared. She has been abducted; but, fortunately, I know exactly where she has been taken, and I will go after her at once. In the meantime, you must both return to the house and remain quiet. Come!"

"I knew it before you told me, Carter," said Quintus. "Look! Here is something that I found waiting for me in my room when I got there. It is a letter. It is about Alicia, and—— But read it for yourself, Carter. Read it for yourself."

CHAPTER VII.

THROUGH SECRET CORRIDORS.

The letter which Quintus had discovered awaiting him in his room was as follows:

"The writer of this note begs to inform Mr. Quintus Quexel that his sister, Alicia, who has just now disappeared in a manner which may seem mysterious, will not be injured in any way save only in the event of the utmost extremities. She is taken from her home to be held as a hostage against the execution of the two persons now under sentence of death at the State prison. On the day of their execution she will be put to death also; but in the event that they escape punishment for what they have done, whether it be through bribery, or in another manner, she will be set at liberty and permitted to return to you unharmed."

That was all.

Quintus attended his mother to her room, summoned her maid and left her. Then he returned to the library, where Nick Carter was awaiting him.

"You said just now, that you already knew where her

abductors have taken Alicia," he said. "If that is true we should lose no time in going to her rescue."

"Come on," said Nick. "I was only waiting for you."

He led the way out of the house, and Quintus followed in silence.

When he reached the stone in the foundation which Alicia had pointed out to him, the detective remarked, as he searched for the spring:

"It was your sister who showed me about this place to-day; it did not occur to her then that the first use to be made of the knowledge would be to trace down her own abductors."

As he ceased speaking, the stone swung halfway around, disclosing, as Alicia had told the detective, an aperture beyond it.

"Now," said Nick, authoritatively, "I wish to enjoin utter silence. Let there be no questions and no remarks. Come. Follow me through this place. You may leave it open behind you, if you please."

He had already taken his electric searchlight from his pocket, and flashed the rays of it through the darkness ahead of them, and now he stepped forward with perfect confidence, for he saw a long and narrow stairway leading downward toward the left, through the very center of the broad and apparently solid foundation.

There were thirty-nine of these steps, for the detective counted them as they went down, so it will be seen that when they arrived at the bottom they were some distance under the surface of the ground.

At the bottom they found themselves in a square room, ceiled on every side with polished stone, and from which at first there appeared to be no means of exit; but a moment's search disclosed the fact that there was another door through that wall not unlike the one by which they had penetrated the foundation, and after a moment they had passed it and stood upon the opposite side.

Here was rather a large, square room, ceiled with polished stones like the other one, and supported by stone pillars extending from the floor to the roof.

Beyond it was another corridor, wide and high, and they hastened forward with their weapons ready for an emergency, for neither of them had any idea that the woman who had so strangely haunted the house and the grounds, who had unquestionably been concerned in the abduction, and who had certainly written the letter which Quintus had found in his room, was without confederates.

From either side of this stone corridor which they now entered doors opened at intervals into square rooms.

Two of these rooms they found to be comfortably supplied with furniture, and each of them bore every evidence of having been lately occupied; none, however, were utterly deserted, nor was there an article to be found in either which suggested any identity to them of the late occupants.

Beyond the fact that one of these rooms seemed to have been occupied by a woman and the other by a man, or perhaps by more than one, there was nothing.

There were six of these rooms, one of which had evidently served the intruders as a kitchen; the three which have not been referred to were vacant, save for a collection of débris in each one.

Beyond the last of these rooms were the entrances to two corridors, which branched apart like the prongs of the letter Y, and Nick plunged into one of them without pausing an instant.

"Remain here, where you are, on guard, till I return," he said to Quexel, and, without waiting for a reply, he hurried on.

He counted his paces as he went, so that he might approximate the distance, and when at last he arrived at a door of oak that was bolted and barred on the side next to him, he knew that he had covered about three hundred feet, and he guessed that he was at the entrance supposed to be underneath the stable.

The fact that the door was bolted and barred on his own side convinced the detective that it was useless to search further in that direction, and, determining to leave investigation of that portion of the subterranean mysteries until a later time, he turned about and retraced his steps as rapidly as possible to the point where he had left Quexel.

"We will have to take the other passage," he said. "Alicia has not been taken through this one."

"Are you convinced that she has been taken away?" asked Quintus. "May they not be in hiding somewhere in this mysterious place?"

"No; it is a sure thing that they have gone."

"But——"

"This place is like an open book once you are in it. The only secrets about it are the means of entrance and egress. It was built originally for hiding things. We have seen the whole place already, Quintus, save only this corridor," said Nick.

"And where do you suppose this will take us?"

"To the river."

"To the river?"

"Ay, to the river. I do not know what manner of business your esteemed forefathers pursued, but it is evident to me that they were not on especially good terms with the customs officers, whatever it was. This passage will take us to the river. I am sure of that."

"It is a full quarter of a mile from here to the river."

"Even so; in that case we will have to walk a quarter of a mile; and I would suggest that we make haste. There is no time to be lost."

Nick Carter took the lead.

With the searchlight in his grasp, so that it would cast its rays down the corridor they were pursuing, he hurried along, with Quintus Quexel close at his heels.

Once they were obliged to descend quite a flight of steps, and Nick remarked that they were placed where they were in order to take the corridor under the base of a huge bowlder which otherwise would have blocked the passage.

All the way the passage led them downhill.

In places this was quite steep; in others it was almost on a level; but at last they arrived at a place where the corridor widened perceptibly, and where the ground beneath their feet was quite damp.

But the detective did not pause to make any comment. He knew that they were approaching the outlet and that was sufficient.

And then, suddenly, they arrived.

So suddenly, in fact, that neither of them were looking for it; but they came around a sharp angle in the passage, and the river was before them.

It was night, of course—considerably after midnight now—but the night was not very dark, and as the detective instantly released the button of his electric light, they were enabled to see far out across the broad expanse of water from where they stood.

Three hundred feet out into the river a sloop yacht was just filling away on the starboard tack, toward the opposite side of the river, and Nick instantly seized Quexel's arm and pointed toward it.

"There they go!" he said, in a low tone. "We are just too late. Your sister is aboard of that sloop as surely as you are standing here."

"Oh! If we could only overtake them," groaned Quexel.

"Perhaps we can, at that," said the detective, quickly.

"Where is your yacht, the *Valorous?*"

"At anchor, just below the wharf. She is just around that point there."

"She has no steam up, of course."

"No; but her fires are not out. They are banked. The water in her boilers is warm, at least, if not hot. It will not take long to get up steam. Come on."

He was turning back when Nick caught him by the arm again.

"Not that way," he said, but this. Follow me."

He ran down the slope in front of them to the edge of the river, and without pausing to remove a single article of his clothing, plunged in, closely followed by Quexel.

From the spot where they entered the water to the point was only a matter of fifty feet, and this they quickly covered.

Emerging there, they crossed the point at full speed and again plunged into the water on the opposite side, swimming out to the steam yacht *Valorous*, which was lying quietly at anchor a hundred feet off shore.

With great overhand strokes Nick Carter cut through the water like a porpoise, and was quickly on the deck of the yacht—so quickly that Quexel, who had followed him, was still some distance away.

But Nick Carter did not pause to look behind him.

He leaped at once toward the cabin which he knew was occupied by Capt. Pearson, and rapped loudly against the door.

Instantly the captain appeared, and in very few words the detective told him what was wanted.

Pearson was a man for emergencies. He had passed the greater part of his life in the United States Navy, and he gloried in any sort of action.

"It won't take ten minutes to get under headway," he called back, as he hurried forward without pausing to put on any of his clothing. "I was working the engines just before dark and she hasn't had a chance to cool off much yet."

Nick did not reply.

Instead, he ran into the captain's room and secured the officer's night glasses, which happened to be of French manufacture and very strong and powerful.

With them he hurried to the mainmast and leaped into the rigging. Then he ran up the shrouds like an old-time sailor, and was soon perched where he could command a wide view of the river.

He had no difficulty in discovering the sloop which was the object of his search.

She was still on the starboard tack, and although there was only a light breeze blowing at the time, she seemed to be making extraordinary headway.

The detective watched her intently, keeping his ears open to hear what was passing on the deck beneath him in the meantime.

He heard the men tumble up at the order of the captain, the rush of feet across the deck, the raking of the fires; he saw the funnel near him belching smoke and sparks, and he knew that the captain was using extraordinary means to hasten the pressure of steam in the boilers as much as possible.

All the while he watched the sloop.

Minute by minute she became fainter in the distance, steadily approaching the opposite shore, and just as she was almost on the point of disappearing, he felt the vessel beneath him tremble under the application of power. Then she forged ahead, and he knew that the chase had begun.

From his perch on the crosstrees he acted in the capacity of pilot, calling out his directions how to steer to the captain on the deck, who transmitted them to the man at the wheel.

The *Valorous* had been built for speed as well as comfort and luxury, and was very fast.

The captain had started her the moment there was steam enough to give her revolutions, and now the chase had begun in earnest.

CHAPTER VIII.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

A stern chase is a long chase.

It is a saying as old as the time since vessels were first made to sail the seas.

Figure it out for yourself: If a vessel has a mile the start of you, even though you travel at the rate of two miles to her one, you will be a long time in overtaking her.

The detective figured that the sloop was something more than a mile ahead of them, and he knew that she was now rapidly approaching the opposite shore of the Hudson.

He did not doubt, either, that those who were aboard of her had seen the preparations that were being made aboard of the yacht, and were aware that they were pursued; they were fools, else.

He remained at his post in the crosstrees, for he could see the sloop, not plainly, but sufficiently well to direct the chase, and he knew that it was almost impossible to see her from the deck of the yacht.

After a little the captain joined him there and himself took a peep at the sloop through the binoculars. Then, very quietly, he remarked:

"They are going to beach her, Mr. Carter."

"Just what I was thinking," responded the detective.

"They know that they are pursued, and that they will soon be overtaken if they remain aboard the sloop, so they are going to take to the woods."

"We will catch them whatever they do," said the detective.

The captain shook his head.

"I have seen that sloop standing on and off around here all day," he said. "I thought she acted rather mysteriously, but I had no reason to interfere with her. She had as much right in the river as I."

"Certainly."

"But one thing about her I did notice."

"What was that."

"She has been across the river to that very point she is headed for now twice during the day, and it is evident to me that there is somebody ashore there now, awaiting her arrival."

"Doubtless there is."

"This business of to-night was planned beforehand."

"No doubt of it."

"What shall you do if they beach her and desert her?"

"I shall follow them."

"Not touch the yacht?"

"I would not hesitate to do so if I thought it were necessary, but I do not. No; it will be sufficient to run as close as possible and give me a chance to get ashore."

"You will follow them alone?"

"Most certainly. And I would much rather follow the trail they will leave behind them here, while it is good and hot, than to take any chances of picking it up later."

"I wish I could assist you."

"You have assisted me already; you are assisting me now."

"Tell me exactly what you wish me to do after they beach their vessel."

"I want you to poke the nose of the *Valorous* as close to the shore as you can; have that small boat at the stern ready to drop into the water, and two men in it to use the oars the instant we are launched. All they will have to do will be to put me ashore."

"All right. It shall be done exactly as you direct."

There was silence for a moment after that, when suddenly the detective exclaimed:

"There she goes! By Jove, but they struck hard. Her mast has gone by the board."

"So it has. Can you see them leaving her?"

"No; the distance is too great, and there is not sufficient light."

"Now give your orders, Mr. Carter."

"Merely to do as I have already said; only run in exactly where the sloop is now."

"All right, sir."

The captain descended to the deck again, and after another moment Nick followed him, for now there was no difficulty in seeing the sloop, beached as she was, from below.

As the yacht approached nearer, Nick could see a small glow of light spring up from the interior of the sloop, and as he watched it it gradually became brighter.

"They have set her afire," he said, in an undertone to the captain, who was standing near him.

"So I see," was the laconic reply.

"How soon will we be alongside of her?" asked Nick.

"In three minutes."

"Don't get close enough so that you will run any danger of the fire; it is not necessary to do that."

"No, fear, sir. I won't."

But Capt. Pearson did not know what danger he was soon to encounter, or he would not have spoken with so much confidence.

He was correct, however, regarding the time that would be required to draw up alongside, for at the end of three minutes they were abreast of the sloop, and about fifty feet distant from her.

At that very moment the small boat which the detective had mentioned was lowered away, and the men, followed by Nick Carter, leaped into her; and then, as they were about to pull away, Quintus Quexel took a long leap from the deck and landed alongside of Nick.

"You did not ask me to come," he said, "but I followed."

"All right," replied Nick. "You will have to follow

if you go with me, for I shall not wait for you to keep up."

"I do not expect you to do so."

They pulled away from the yacht, and came in plain sight of the sloop, which was now ablaze throughout her hull; and at that very instant it seemed as if the hills were rent asunder, for an explosion which deafened the ears, blinded the eyes and startled sleeping persons from their slumbers a dozen miles away, seemed to tear the trees and rocks from the surrounding hills and dash them into the bosom of the river.

A volume of fire shot into the air from the spot where the sloop had been, and then settled down into black darkness.

It was almost a miracle that nobody on board the steam yacht, or the yacht itself, was injured, for it had unquestionably been the intention of the men who blew up the sloop to destroy the *Valorous* with it.

In this, however, they had failed, and the instant that the effects of the explosion were past, Nick Carter called out to the men in the boat with him.

"Pull, lads, pull!" he exclaimed. "Get me ashore as quickly as you can."

And they did so.

The instant the bow of the small boat touched the beach, Nick Carter leaped to the shore.

Nor did he pause there, where his feet landed on the soft soil, but he instantly darted forward through the darkness toward the bank which led upward and away toward a thick wood.

This bank extended inland for some distance and then rose abruptly in the form of a huge cliff, and Nick Carter knew that there must be a road along its base somewhere by which the fugitives would travel, since it was manifestly impossible for them to scale the cliff.

It was this road that he sought, pulling out his electric light, and throwing the gleam of it ahead of him as he ran.

And he found it almost at once.

He could see, also, where a carriage and several horses had stood there waiting; a carriage drawn by two horses, he concluded, and two extra horses, doubtless under saddle.

It was not difficult to determine which way they had gone. The detective was able to settle that question at a glance, and without a perceptible pause he dashed away through the darkness in pursuit.

He had run some distance when he heard the sound of heavy breathing behind him, and a moment later the voice of Quintus Quexel came to him in gasps.

"I don't know, Carter, if I can keep up this pace very long, but I'm going to try."

"All right," replied Nick. "Save your breath. Don't talk."

They ran on after that, unceasingly, and presently they began to ascend rather a steep hill.

Here the pace told on them terribly—not so much on the detective, for he was inured to fatigue in all its forms; but Quexel began to lower behind, and after a little Nick could hear him no more.

For one moment he thought of waiting for him, and then remembering the urgency of his quest, and the necessity for speed, he forged ahead more swiftly than ever.

Now and then as he ran, he pressed the button of his electric light, and threw the glare for an instant on the road ahead of him; but this was done only to satisfy himself that he was still following along the trail of the fugitives.

Fugitives!

He had not once stopped to consider how many there might be of them; what he did know was that there were two among them whom he wished to overtake—Alicia and the woman who had abducted her; the woman who had played the ghost so successfully; the woman who was the living image of that beautiful creature who had lived so long ago in Mexico, and whose lineaments had been perpetuated in wax by the man who had loved and wronged her.

Suddenly the road turned up a hill which was much steeper than any the detective had encountered heretofore, and he came to a walk.

"One thing is certain," he mused, "if I cannot run up this hill, neither could they, even though they had horses. It would be a good horse indeed that a driver would induce to go faster than a walk up this incline."

But it was not long even if it was steep.

After a distance of forty yards or more, the detective came out upon the level plain at the top of the cliff, and ahead of him was a long stretch of straight road.

The detective almost uttered a cry of joy when he saw a cloud of dust over the tree tops a half mile ahead of him.

It may seem incredible that he could have seen a cloud of dust at that distance in the night, but the last quarter of the moon had just asserted itself, and it was against the light shed by that that he saw the dust.

It told him that the fugitives were not as far ahead of him as he had feared, and, bending down to his work, he added a notch or two to his headway.

And then, as he ran along, he saw something which almost made him cry out with joy.

It was a pasture, and in that pasture, quietly grazing, were half a dozen horses.

It is a serious matter to steal a horse in this enlightened age, but Nick Carter did not hesitate. He felt assured that he could make it all right with the owner when he should return the animal, and so he leaped the fence and began to work his way cautiously toward the animals.

Horses running at large in pastures are not easily approached by strangers, and Nick Carter was well aware of this fact; furthermore, he possessed neither saddle nor bridle, and nothing with which to guide the animal once he was caught.

But among Nick Carter's accomplishments, he was a thorough horseman, and he gave the idea of the lack of facilities not a thought.

He only wished to catch the horse; he knew that he could do the rest, once he was astride of the creature's back.

Fortunately, these horses were evidently pets at home. They did not seem in the least alarmed when he approached them, but raised their heads and looked gently at him when he spoke to them.

In a moment he had selected the best, and, seizing it by the forelock, he led it toward the fence, which was of the old-fashioned "rail" variety.

It was the work of a moment only to take down a section of the fence, and then, without pausing even to repair the fence, he leaped upon the back of the stolen horse and in another minute he was galloping at full speed along the road taken by the abductors of Alicia Quexel.

CHAPTER IX.

IN AWFUL PERIL.

Nick Carter gave no thought to Quintus Quexel now. He only knew that, somewhere far behind, the brother of Alicia was straining his utmost to catch up with him, and it did not occur to him that the young millionaire would follow his own example and steal a horse.

But that is exactly what Quexel did do.

He crossed the brow of the hill just as Nick Carter leaped upon the back of the horse he had taken from the pasture, and realizing instantly what the detective had done, he saw no reason why he could not do the same.

The breach which Nick had made in the fence was still there, and the remaining horses in the field, with becoming docility, had followed their stolen companion close to it, so that Quexel had only to step through the fence to possess himself of one of them.

He, too, was a perfect horseman.

He had been reared with horses, and had ridden them to hounds and otherwise all his life, and he thought no more of mounting one of them without the aid of a saddle or bridle than Nick Carter did.

And so it happened that five minutes after Nick Carter mounted his horse and started away in pursuit of the abductors, Quintus Quexel had also obtained a mount and was rapidly dashing after him.

The horse which Nick Carter bestrode seemed ready enough for a run, and, moreover, he was entirely fresh.

Unencumbered by saddle or bridle, and with only the weight of the detective to carry, he dashed away at a rattling pace which told the detective that he would not be long in overtaking the fugitives.

As he rode, he used his light.

From time to time he cast a flash of it upon the roadway, just sufficiently long to discover the marks made by the wheels that had just passed that way, and the hoofs of the extra horses ridden by some of the flying party.

After a distance of about two miles had been covered, Nick came to a fork in the road, and here he came to a halt for an instant, for his light told him that the carriage had taken one road while the horsemen had gone by the other one.

But he was not long in deciding which to pursue, for he argued that the two women would certainly be in the vehicle.

Then on he went again, even faster than before, for another two miles, and then he became conscious that he was rapidly overtaking them.

He came upon them quite suddenly; that is, in sight of them, for he perceived that the carriage had turned into a side road, away from the main thoroughfare, and was driving along what appeared to be a private way, toward a house with a tall chimney, one at either end, built after the Southern fashion, and showed on a hill in the distance.

"That is their goal," he muttered to himself, "and it is just as well for me not to hasten now, for I doubt if they have any idea that I could trace them here so soon. It will be better for me to take them by surprise, if that is possible."

Satisfied that the house he had seen was their objective point, he dismounted and turned the horse he had ridden loose in a nearby pasture, and then made his way along on foot toward the building which now showed plainly against the sky.

The carriage had disappeared among some trees toward the approach, and Nick kept himself well in the shadow at the side of the road lest he might be seen by one of the fugitives who might be looking back to see if they were pursued.

Approaching in this way, cautiously at every step, he gradually drew nearer to the house, and at last came out upon an open glade directly in front of it.

He could see that the party had entered.

Lights were gleaming from several of the windows, and he could hear the stamping of horses in the stable beyond the house, and the voices of men who were caring for them.

"The point is, where did the men who took the other road disappear to?" he asked himself, and then suddenly it dawned upon him.

"Why, they merely came to the house by a shorter route which the vehicle was unable to follow," he said, in re-

ply to his own question. "They doubtless were the first to arrive. Now, I wonder what sort of a nest this is."

Perceiving that there was nobody who could observe him, he dropped flat on his stomach and began worming his way forward through the tall grass.

At last he reached the broad piazza and climbed upon it.

Then, as silently as a cat, he crept across it to a place beneath one of the windows, from which a light was gleaming, and, to his joy, he found that although the blinds were closed and fastened on the inside, the window had been raised, for the night was very warm, and doubtless the house was hot and close.

As he partly raised himself and moved the shutters ever so little, so that he could peer into the room, three persons entered it.

The first was without doubt the original of the "ghost" at Cedarmere, and Nick Carter recognized at once the perfect likeness she bore to the wax figure of Mercedes Corona he had once found under such strange circumstances.

Close behind her was a man, who, strangely enough, resembled the girl as closely as a man may resemble a woman, and he instantly decided that this was another brother of the Balmecedes.

And with him was Alicia Quexel!

Her head was raised haughtily. There was not a trace of fear upon her features. She bore herself like an outraged queen, and Nick Carter admired the pluck she showed, even under such trying circumstances.

She had evidently been blindfolded during the ride there, for the bandage was still around her, only that it had fallen from her eyes and now rested against her neck.

But these three were not all who entered the room. Two more—men they were—followed directly behind them.

It was the woman who had played the ghost who spoke first, and she addressed her remarks directly to Alicia.

"I am very sorry for you," she said, turning to Quintus' sister, "but there was no other way, Miss Quexel."

"No other way than what, if you please?" demanded Alicia.

"Than to bring you here."

"Than to abduct me, you mean."

"Call it by any name you please, I am still sincere when I tell you that I am sorry that the necessity arose."

Alicia shrugged her shoulders and smiled scornfully.

"And now that you have me here, in some old house, hidden away Heaven knows where, what do you intend to do with me? Am I to be murdered?"

"Not at once, at least," was the cool reply. "Perhaps not at all."

"Come now, that is reassuring. I supposed that I was in the power of a band of cutthroats, whose thirst for blood was so insatiable that it would have to be satisfied at once."

"You are a brave woman, Miss Quexel," said the beautiful ex-ghost, admiringly.

"And you, I strongly suspect, are an abandoned one," was the quick retort.

Mercedes—for that was her name—flushed hotly beneath the lash of this insult; but if a ready response rose to her lips, she suppressed it, and contented herself by saying, very quietly:

"Vituperation will not benefit you in the least, Miss Quexel. I have brought you here to spare you, if possible."

"To spare me from what?"

"From death."

"Am I, then, in grave danger of death?"

"You are in grave danger of it. Only for my intercession you would have been killed the very day of your arrival from Europe."

"It was kind of you to intercede for me; but if you really did so, I cannot understand why you have chosen to abduct me now, and to threaten me with death—at some future time."

"I have done that to give your brother an opportunity to save you."

"How can he save me?"

"He has been notified how it can be done."

"How, pray? Tell me."

"By using some part of the millions he possesses in bribing the jailers who have charge of the two men who were convicted of the death of his wife, and having them set at liberty."

"Do you suppose for a moment that he will do that?"

It was the turn of Mercedes to shrug her shoulders.

"It depends upon his love for you," she replied.

"Or his love for you—you!" said Alicia, with cutting scorn in her voice.

Mercedes started as if she had received a blow, and Nick Carter, from his place at the window, could see that she first flushed hotly, and then grew terribly pale. But she spoke very quietly when she did speak.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

Alicia laughed outright.

"You should go on the stage, mademoiselle," she said, through her mirth. "You would make a great actress."

"What did you mean by that remark?" insisted Mercedes.

"The remark should explain itself, it seems to me," retorted Alicia.

"I did not understand it. I do not understand it now."

"Can you deny that you are in love with my brother?" came the cutting question from Alicia, delivered like the stroke of a whiplash.

It was evidently entirely unexpected, and it evidently struck home, too.

Mercedes started back with a little cry, and one hand flew to her throat, as if in remonstrance.

"What nonsense is this?" she demanded; but Alicia laughed again.

"You have answered me already," she said. "You need no longer attempt to deny it."

One of the men who had entered the room with the party stepped toward them at this juncture, and, bending forward, gazed long and earnestly into Mercedes' eyes.

"What was it she said?" he demanded, in Spanish. "It seemed to have a strange effect upon you, señorita."

"It was nothing—nothing at all," replied Mercedes, evading the question.

"Ah, yes, it was something; it was something about love. I understood that word. I have heard it before and I know what it means. And it had a strange effect upon you. Tell me what it was she said."

"I will not tell you. It does not concern you at all," was the haughty reply.

The man shrugged his shoulders and drew back again to the position he had left to approach her, but it was plain to be seen that he was not satisfied, for there was a deep scowl across his features, and thereafter he kept his glowing eyes fixed first upon Mercedes and then upon Alicia, as if he would read their very thoughts.

Alicia, who understood nothing of Spanish, but who guessed very correctly what had happened and what had been said in that short interchange of sentences between the two, now laughed outright again.

"Is that person one of your many lovers, mademoiselle?" she asked, with studied insolence; and she laughed again; and then she turned her defiant eyes full upon the man who had questioned Mercedes, and deliberately laughed in his face.

It is impossible to describe the taunting scorn she managed to incorporate in that one mirthless laugh; but it did its work even more thoroughly than she had hoped or believed it could do, for the man, with an oath, drew a knife from his belt and suddenly leaped forward, straight toward Alicia Quexel.

CHAPTER X.

A NEW MEANING FOR THE CURSE.

The Mexican's attack upon Alicia was so sudden and so utterly unexpected that nobody in that room was prepared for it, and he was almost upon her before a movement was made to defend her.

Even Nick Carter had been in nowise prepared for this issue of the verbal duel between the two young women, and he realized with sudden horror that for once in his life he was in a position where he could view an incident of this kind without being able to interfere.

The reader will remember that the detective was outside on the piazza of the house, and that the blinds of the window through which he was gazing into the room were closed and fastened.

He was peering through a mere crack between two of the shutters—a crack that was much too small for him to hope to send a bullet through it, and so, for the moment his great powers were rendered utterly impotent.

But it so happened that his interference was not needed.

Even upon the instant, when the detective was about to crash one of his feet through the blinds and the window with one powerful stroke, Mercedes spared him the necessity.

With a motion so quick that the eye could scarcely follow it, the hand which she had been holding against her throat ever since Alicia's taunt clutched at something that was concealed in her bosom, and then, as the Mexican darted forward and had almost reached Alicia with the uplifted knife in his hand ready to strike the deadly blow that would have killed her, Mercedes acted.

Her right arm straightened out. There was a gleam of steel in her hand as it darted forward. The weapon which she had carried concealed in her bosom left her hand like a dart flying from the muzzle of an air gun, and the point of it struck the Mexican fairly against his wrist.

The force of the impact threw his hand backward and against the casing of the door, and the keen, needle point of the dagger pierced the wrist of the would-be assassin and pinned it there as securely as if it had been driven home with a hammer.

And there he stood, white to the lips with pain and suffering in his eyes and an ugly frown upon his handsome face, his uplifted hand pinned to the casing of the door, helpless, cowed and beaten.

The dauntless smile of courage had not left Alicia's face even when death threatened her and approached so near; and as for Mercedes, she had started back just a little after she threw the dagger with such unerring aim, and had drawn a small revolver which she now held in her hand ready for instant use.

The other members of that group had remained motionless, and even now they one and all seemed afraid to move.

It was evident to Nick Carter, in that moment, that they one and all not only feared Mercedes, but that they also stood in some awe of her, for a reason which did not appear on the surface, but which he could readily guess.

In those countries where the vendetta is sworn and religiously kept, the life of one so sworn is held sacred by all save those who are concerned in the oath.

But the tableau lasted only a moment, for Mercedes stepped forward herself, and plucked her dagger from the Mexican's wrist, returned it to her bosom, and, with an imperious gesture, ordered him from the room.

At the same time, in Spanish, she directed one of the men to accompany him and to assist in caring for the wound.

When they were gone—for no more resistance was offered to her authority—she turned to Alicia, and very quietly she said:

"You are a brave young woman, Miss Quexel, but it would be well for you if you would put a curb on your unruly tongue. You are in much greater peril than you imagine."

"When I have one so accomplished as yourself in the uses of assassin's tools to defend me, I have little cause to fear," responded Alicia, with mock gratitude and with inimitable irony. "May I venture to inquire what you intend to do with me now that you have brought me here? And if you intend to keep me standing all night?"

Of a sudden the anger died out of Mercedes' eyes, and a beautiful smile crossed her perfect features.

"I wish," she murmured, half dreamily, "that you and I might have met under different circumstances. We would have loved each other, for you are admirable."

"Thank you"—with fine scorn—"you should be so, with all your beauty."

"I perceive that you are incorrigible; that you will not believe any good of me," said Mercedes.

"Why should I believe good of you? What have you done to make me—or others—believe good of you? Would you have me think you a saint because you have intruded upon a household where you were not wanted? Would you have me think good of you because you have played the part of a specter so well? Would you have me think good of you because you are an expert in the art of assassination? Or would you have me think well of you because you are—what you are!—and because my brother, who should yet be mourning his murdered wife, has so far forgotten himself as to become your lover?"

This time the taunt did not seem to anger Mercedes; it seemed to have no effect whatever upon her; but she stepped forward until she was quite close to Alicia, and then, with a great calmness in her voice, she asked:

"Does your brother love me? Do you speak from knowledge of a fact, or are you only dealing in conjectures? Answer me truthfully, for much may depend upon your reply; and you need have no fear of answering truly, for none in this room save ourselves understands one word of English. Answer me; does your brother love me?"

There was something in the voice and manner of the beautiful Mexican which appealed to Alicia more strongly than she would have cared to admit, and to gain time she demanded in reply:

"Why should I answer you at all?"

"There are many reasons," was the quiet reply. Then she took another step forward until she was quite close to Alicia, and added: "Would you have me tell you the truth about your brother and—and—about my own reason for intruding upon the privacy of your home? My reason for capturing you and bringing you here? Would you have the truth?"

"Yes, if you can tell it."

"Would you believe me?"

Alicia shrugged her shoulders.

"I do not know," she said. "I do not feel in the mood to believe much that you say, under the present circumstances; but you might try me."

"Are you familiar with that part of the history of your family which is called 'The Curse of the Quexels'?" asked Mercedes.

"Oh, yes; with a part of it, at least."

"And what if I should tell you that the two men who

are now condemned to death for the murder of Janice Quexel are my cousins?"

"I could quite believe them to be your own brothers," retorted Alicia.

"Others believe that, so it is not strange," was the quiet reply; "but they are not my brothers; they are my cousins. They are Balmecedes; I am a Corona. I am Mercedes Corona, the living namesake as well as the living image of that poor girl who was driven to suicide more than sixty years ago by the perfidy of your grandfather."

"Surely you do not hold me responsible for the villainies of my grandfather," said Alicia.

"No, not I; but there are others who do so. It is the religion I have been taught."

"Then you had better change your belief at once."

"Wait; I have not finished yet."

"Well?"

"We are the last of the race—those cousins of mine who are now in prison and myself."

"You should thank Heaven for that!"

Mercedes paid no heed to this taunt, but continued:

"There is my father, also; but he is past consideration now. It was he who was with me in the underground part of your establishment on the opposite side of the Hudson. But he is ill now. Yesterday—in the early morning, before it was light, he went away. To-day he is on a vessel embarked for Mexico. His health has broken down. If he reaches his home alive, it will be the one thing for which he has prayed, that he might be buried beside his ancestors; so you see, Miss Quexel, those cousins of mine and I are the last of the race."

She paused a moment, and then went on:

"I could not remain in those subterranean vaults of your house after the departure of my father, and I had sworn an oath which—until this moment—I have believed could not be broken. That oath—I am telling you the truth and the whole truth now—was to take your life, Miss Quexel, and to carry out the provisions of the curse against your brother."

"So!" said Alicia, scornfully. "It is out at last. You have brought me here to murder me. I understand you now."

"No, you do not. I have not brought you here to murder you. I have brought you here to save you."

"A likely thing, that is!"

"I have asked you to believe me. I still beg you to do so. I am telling you the truth."

"Go on, then."

"I asked you a moment ago if you knew the curse. I ask you again."

"Perhaps I do not. Suppose you tell me what it is."

"It is the oath of vendetta, sworn by my family against yours more than sixty years ago, which decrees that the Quexels shall be exterminated, and that means of extermination decrees that no woman who bears the name of Quexel shall live to bear children. Your mother escaped, but she is the only one who has done so since the oath was sworn; but you, Alicia Quexel, were doomed from the day you were born, and also——"

She paused, and Alicia said:

"Well?"

"Whomsoever your brother might select for a wife was also doomed to death."

"And now you are the only instrument that is left to carry out these sentences? Is that it?"

"I wish it were, but it is not. My father, perceiving that he was not long for this world, and realizing that only I was left to carry out the curse, called in some distant relatives to his aid. That one whose wrist I just wounded is a distant cousin. The man who faces us now, over there by the door, and who is endeavoring to comprehend what we are talking about, is another, and they are as distantly related to each other as they are to me; but they have sworn the oath."

"And they will kill, even if you do not?"

"Yes; they will kill, even if I do not."

"Why do you tell me all this? Do you seek to frighten me, or are you merely seeking to prepare me for the inevitable end?"

"Neither, Miss Quexel. I tell you because of a statement you have made."

"A statement I have made? I!"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"You have twice—no, three times—asserted that your brother loves me. Is it true?"

"Do not you know whether it is true or not?"

"I know? How should I know? I never saw your brother until I went to dwell in the secret rooms under the foundations of your house. I never exchanged a word with him until I purposely confronted him in the grounds which surround your house—there near the entrance to the grove of firs. I have never felt the touch of his hand, or he of mine."

She paused in her speech and hesitated a moment; and then she went on rapidly:

"All these years that I have lived—I am twenty, Miss Quexel—I have known that somewhere in the world there was a heart which responded to mine. Until I saw your brother and looked into his eyes, it was all a dream; but then, on the instant, it became a reality. When I saw Quintus Quexel, I knew that it was I upon whom the curse had fallen, for I loved him! I knew that it was against my own life that I had sworn the vendetta, because I love your brother. And then—then you tell me that he loves me! Me! Is it true? Tell me—is it true that he loves me?"

CHAPTER XI.

A PROPHECY OF THE PAST.

Just at the moment when the scene inside the room reached the point which is described at the close of the preceding chapter, Nick Carter became conscious that there was some sort of a commotion taking place in another part of the house, and as Mercedes ceased speaking, she also heard it.

Alicia had parted her lips to speak in reply to the question just asked, when her attention was also arrested by the sound, and they both stood in a listening attitude in order to determine the cause of it.

And they had not long to wait.

The noise drew nearer and nearer, as if some one was approaching along the hallway, and then the door was thrown ajar and three men entered the room together, while a fourth brought up the rear.

Of the three men, Quintus Quexel was the one in the middle.

Two lariats had been thrown over his shoulders, and had settled down until they held his arms pinioned to his sides; and the two men—one on either side of him—held the ends of the lariats taut, so that there was no possibility that their prisoner might escape.

The fourth man had his right wrist bandaged, and was evidently the person whom Mercedes had wounded; but in his left hand he carried a revolver which he held so that the muzzle of it covered the prisoner.

It was he who made the announcement of their errand, over the shoulders of the others who were in advance of him; and he spoke in Spanish, which was perfectly intelligible to the detective.

"We heard him coming," he explained—and strangely enough there seemed to be no resentment in his voice or manner because of his wounded wrist. "We heard him coming, and we went out to meet him. He rode a horse, bareback, up the path, and it was an easy matter to cast the reatas over him, and to lift him from his seat on the back of the horse. It would seem, señorita, that fate had brought him to us at the right moment."

The man did not realize how true his words were, for he had no idea of the subject of the conversation between the two young women at the moment of the interruption; but it was evident that no matter what he intended by the words, Mercedes took them literally, for her eyes sparkled strangely, although she did not at once reply.

Nick, outside the window, smiled as he wondered to himself if they would consider that fate had also brought him there at the propitious moment, if they had only known that there was a spectator and a listener to that scene.

When Quintus was led into the room, his first exclamation was:

"Alicia! I have found you!"

"Yes," replied his sister; "but you seem to be in as bad a predicament as I."

"Perhaps not, Alicia," he said, with a meaning she could not understand; for she did not know that he referred to Nick Carter; that her brother knew that the detective could not be far distant, and that wherever he was he would not be long delayed in coming to their aid; and if she had known that much, she had no idea who Nick Carter really was, and would not have felt the entire confidence in help from him that her brother did.

There were six men, altogether, in the room now, without counting Quexel, and Nick wondered if Mercedes would not send some of them away.

It was rather an overwhelming force for the detective to tackle single-handed, for if he did so, it was extremely doubtful if he could protect the women at the same time he was fighting the men; and so he waited for a better opportunity.

Quintus Quexel's eyes had left his sister's face, and had traveled to the exquisite beauty of Mercedes Corona, whom he was now regarding earnestly.

He did not see the malevolent glances of the man with the wounded wrist who stood behind him, and it is doubtful if he would have heeded them had he done so.

"Tell me who you are?" he said to her, presently.

She did not reply at once; but, after a moment, the answer came with some reluctance.

"I am Mercedes Corona," she said.

"The name is the same as——"

"Yes," she said, interrupting him.

"You are a perfect counterpart of that other Mercedes," he continued, still looking into her eyes and apparently utterly forgetful that he was bound and a prisoner.

"Yes," she repeated.

"Why have you stolen away my sister, señorita?"

"I have just informed her that I did it to save her."

"To save her? Surely you have taken a strange method for doing that."

Mercedes Corona did not reply.

She was silent for so long a time that Quintus was about to speak again when she commanded him to silence by a gesture of appeal which there was no mistaking.

Presently she spoke, but her words came rapidly and in the Spanish language, and she addressed them to the men who were grouped around the tableau.

What she said was of course perfectly intelligible to the detective, outside the window, but neither Alicia nor Quintus understood a word of it.

What she said was this:

"I require you all at once to return to the dining room, and leave this prisoner alone with me. You need not bind him, for if he makes an attempt to escape I will find a way to do what should be done," and she held up her pistol suggestively, although she did not particularize as to what she would do with it in such an event. "Take the señorita with you, and detain her there until I call, but if one of you so much as touches a hand to her while she is absent from this room—beware! That is all!"

There was a growl of dissent from the man with the wounded wrist, but a glance from the clear, fearless eyes of Mercedes Corona quelled the rebellion within him, and he was the first to turn away in obedience to her command.

Then Mercedes turned to Alicia and spoke to her in English.

"Will you follow these men into the dining room and remain there until I call?" she asked. "I assure you that you will be perfectly safe, Miss Quexel."

"Why?" asked Alicia.

"Because I ask it for your own good. I would talk with your brother alone. I will save you both if I can."

"Shall I go, Quintus?" asked Alicia, of her brother.

Instead of replying directly to her, he turned toward Mercedes.

"Will my sister be entirely safe with these men?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"Shall I go, Quintus?" repeated Alicia.

"Yes, Alicia, go. I have confidence in the promise and in the statement just made by——"

"By the spirit of Mercedes de Corona y Balmecedes, which speaks to you now through me," interrupted Mercedes. "You have my promise in her name. She has been dead many years, and she has been revenged over and over again. Surely the thirst for blood is satiated. I speak for her. It is an impulse which I cannot control. Your grandfather was her husband, for a time, in the eyes of God even if against the law of man. I speak for her. She speaks to you through me. Your sister shall be safe. There shall be no more blood shed in the cause of vengeance. The Quexel family shall endure. Your sister shall live to be happy—and you, Quintus Quexel, shall also live to find a happiness of which you have never dreamed. I see it; I feel it; I speak with the tongue of prophecy. Believe me."

It is impossible here to depict the earnestness with which she spoke, but it made its impression upon all who heard it; upon the man to whom the words were addressed; upon his sister, who listened in wonder surcharged with awe; upon the men grouped around them who comprehended no word that was uttered, but yet who felt the electricity of her meaning in the air about them; and upon the detective who waited in the dark under the window, outside on the piazza.

"Shall I go, Quintus?" Alicia asked, a third time.

"Yes," he said, inclining his head.

"Until I call," said Mercedes, motioning with her hand for the men to leave them.

There was something compelling in the attitude and manner of Mercedes Corona, and there was not one among her former companions who dared to disobey her.

The lariats which held Quintus were relaxed and the coils dropped to the floor.

The men stepped back and one of them opened the door, and then, through the aisle they formed between them, Alicia walked past the threshold with the air of a queen.

Not once since she was brought into the room had she manifested the slightest sign of fear or apprehension, and now she might have been the arbiter of every fate there if her bearing were any criterion of the conditions.

The door closed behind them, and Quintus Quexel was

alone with Mercedes Corona; with the woman in wax come to life again, it almost seemed to him; with a ghost of the past, long since forgotten save by a few, suddenly revived in this beautiful woman; with emotions which he could not fathom; with a strange and incomprehensible yearning toward this beautiful creature for whom he believed that he should feel nothing but hate, and scorn, and repulsion, yet toward whom he felt strangely attracted.

For a moment after they were alone together they gazed at each other in silence; but after a little she said the one word:

"Well?"

"Who are you?" he asked, scarcely conscious of the words he uttered.

"I have told you."

"I believed that you were a spirit, when you appeared to us, there at my home."

"I was a spirit. I did not know it myself, but I know now that I was a spirit."

"I do not understand you."

"Nor do I understand myself. I seem to speak with a tongue not my own. I speak with an impulse which comes from afar—from out of the past—from Mercedes de Corona whom your grandfather loved."

"Why did you come to our house as you did?" he asked.

"I came as others of my family have done before me—to kill."

Quintus shuddered.

"To carry out the curse? The oath of the vendetta?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And it was for that purpose that you stole my sister away?"

"No; I would have saved your sister."

"Then why did you steal her?"

"To save her from the others—or at least from two of them. Had I hesitated, they would have acted."

"And murdered my sister?"

"Yes."

"And myself also?"

"Not but——"

"I should never have married again."

"Then you would have been spared until——"

"Until what?"

"Until you changed your mind; for you would have changed it in time."

He was silent again, for a moment, and then he asked once more:

"Who are you? What relation are you to the dead woman whom you so strangely resemble?"

"My father was—is, if he is still living—the son of her elder brother."

"And fate has reproduced her features in you."

"Ay, and her heart, her soul, her loving and trusting nature. Believe me, Quintus Quexel, I have told you the worst. I was sent here to kill; but I never had the heart to kill. I was sent here to carry out a decree of vengeance, but my heart has never held aught but compassion and love."

"And those men who killed my—who murdered Janice—what were they—what are they to you?"

"My cousins, many times removed. They are Belmecedes; I am a Corona."

"Yes, I understand."

"Listen," she said, suddenly taking a step nearer to him. "Do you understand the theory of reincarnation? Of metempsychosis? I am the reincarnated Mercedes de Corona; you are the reincarnated Aaron Quexel—your grandfather. We have been returned to the world, to undo a great wrong. It is fate. Long ago, you were my husband, in the sight of God, and now—now—the prophecy of the past shall be fulfilled."

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST OF THE CURSE.

Mercedes had stepped up quite close to Quintus, and she was looking into his eyes when she made this strange announcement.

"Why did you not seize hold of me when you encountered me there near the grove, in your own grounds?" she asked, when he did not speak.

"I could not," he faltered, in reply.

"Why?"

"I do not know, only that I could not."

"And when you encountered me the second time?"

"It was the same."

"And the third time?"

"I longed to seize you, but not to deliver you up to justice. I dared not approach you, and yet you drew me—you drew me in a way that I could not understand."

"Did you believe that I was a spirit?"

"For a time I did."

"And when you knew that I was not?"

"I don't know what to reply. I did not know what to do, or what to think. I went to New York. I brought the detective back with me. I dared not tell him all. I dared not——"

"Tell him all of what?"

"Why do you ask, since you know so well? Why did you send the others out of the room in order that we might converse together alone?"

He had responded with sudden vehemence, and now he went on, rapidly!

"You have known this thing—this thing that you have just said—this wonderful thing about you and me—about my grandfather and the original Mercedes—you have known about it from the first—but I—I have only known it since that third encounter of ours—only since then."

"But you do know it? You know it now? You know that it is the truth?"

"Yes," he said. "I know it now."

"That it is a reincarnation? That I was sent here to you? That, although I have never touched your hand or your mine, that I am your wife, and that you are my husband?"

"Yes—since more than sixty years ago."

There was silence between them again.

Neither moved from the positions they occupied.

"Would you have it otherwise?" she asked, at last, in a low tone.

"No; I would not have it otherwise," he replied, calmly, raising his eyes again to hers.

"And is it your wish—is it your desire—that we—you and I—fulfill the destiny that was written for us so long ago?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because somewhere, deep down in my heart—I do not know how or why—there is ungovernable longing for you—there is great love for you. I have felt it since I first saw you. Nay, more! I have felt it, and have known it since I first looked upon the waxen image of that other Mercedes."

"There was no other Mercedes," she said, gently. "I am that same Mercedes, born again into the world."

"Yes, I know. I know it now."

"It is a strange fate," she murmured.

"Yes," he replied.

There was silence again, and presently she said to him:

"You must tell me what to do, Quintus."

"What to do?" he asked, not understanding her.

"Yes. You must tell me what I am to do—where I am to go to wait for you. Shall I return to Mexico?"

"No, no, no! Not there!" he exclaimed. "You will remain at my own home—with my sister—and my mother. It is I who will go away. I will be gone a year—perhaps two years—until I get used to this. I am no longer Quintus Quexel; I have become Aaron Quexel. I do not understand myself. I do not understand all that has happened."

"Your sister? Your mother? Will they receive me?"

"My sister was the first to discover the truth. She knew it before we did—at least, before I did."

"Yes, I know."

"Send for her. Bring her here. She is in the other room with those men. Ah, I had forgotten her!"

"Hark!" exclaimed Mercedes, suddenly. "They are coming."

It was true.

There was a sound of rushing feet through the hall; the noise of angry voices.

Then there was a pistol shot, and at the same instant the door was thrown open, and Alicia burst in upon them.

And, as she threw herself into the room, she wheeled in her tracks and fired the pistol a second time, and a man, who had just reached the threshold in pursuit of her, threw up his hands and crashed to the floor without a groan.

Then the doorway was filled by the forms of four other men, who all tried to crowd through the narrow space at once, and, as they did so, Mercedes raised her pistol and fired straight at the struggling mass.

And then another sound broke in upon them.

It was the sound of splintering wood, of crashing glass, of heavy blows.

The window where Nick Carter had been a spectator to all this scene crashed into the room, and through the aperture thus made the detective leaped at a bound.

Three of the men, were crowding through the doorway, managed to effect an entrance.

They gained the interior of the room just as the detective did the same, and at the very instant that Mercedes would have fired a second time Nick Carter sprang past her.

The foremost of the three men was a burly fellow—a true type of the Mexican desperado—and he held a

gleaming knife in one hand, while his left arm was raised as a shield as he advanced.

He saw Nick Carter, and leaped toward him, but, as he did so, the detective's foot was raised with sudden force, and the toe of it caught his wrist which held the knife.

With a howl of rage, the man saw his weapon, upon which he placed so much dependence, torn from his grasp and sent spinning across the room, where it stuck, quivering, in the woodwork above the door by which he had entered; and at the same instant he was seized, raised from the floor and hurled bodily after the knife.

Two others were behind him, and they managed to seize upon Nick before he could disengage himself from the man he had thrown.

One of them would have succeeded in stabbing the detective, but Alicia sprang forward and seized his arm as it was descending to deliver the blow.

She could not stay it entirely, but she diverted it, so that the knife merely passed into and through Nick Carter's coat, and the next instant this man also went the way the other had gone, across the room, hurled by a force which he could not resist.

And, as he was shot away like the projectile from a catapult, Quintus Quexel found time to act.

He was himself an athlete in his way, and he could deliver a blow with considerable effect, as was now proved, for the fellow he struck went down like a clod—and remained where he fell, motionless.

The man whom Alicia had shot, in the doorway, was groaning, and, as Nick tossed a couple of pairs of handcuffs to Quintus, he was surprised to see Alicia leap through the door and disappear.

Thrusting a revolver into the hands of Quintus, and telling him to shoot, without mercy, the first man who attempted to escape, Nick sped after her, and found her in the dining room, standing over a man who was rapidly dying.

It was the man with the wounded wrist, and, as Nick approached, Alicia got down on her knees beside him.

Then, as she felt the touch of the detective's hand upon her shoulder, she turned to him and said, with a pathetic cadence in her voice:

"I have killed him! I ought not to have killed him! Oh, it is terrible!"

But at that instant the dying man opened his eyes and smiled.

"You did right, señorita," he murmured, in Spanish, which Nick translated for her. "I deserved to die. It is better so. I forgive you. If you will pray for the repose of my soul, and forgive me, all will be well."

A shudder passed through him, and he was dead.

Nick raised Alicia from the floor and led her away.

We will not enter upon the details of the proceeding in the house after that few moments of excitement and strife.

Of the two men who had taken the oath of vendetta, one was dead, slain by Alicia in self-defense, for he had first sought to pollute her lips with his, and, when she struck him in the face in retaliation, he tried again to stab her. It was then that she shot him with a pistol which she seized from the belt of one of his companions.

The other was the man whom Nick Carter had first encountered when he entered the room, and he had all the vendetta taken out of him forever, for his wrist and three of his ribs were broken, and he was otherwise incapacitated for pleasure.

Of the others, very little need be said. They were taken to prison, ultimately convicted for short terms, and sent away.

* * * * * * *

The "Curse of the Quexels" was at rest at last.

That terrible ghost of the past was laid forever.

Vengeance for the wrong committed by a man more than sixty years ago was appeased.

The oath of the vendetta was put away and forgotten.

It was fifteen months later when Nick Carter stood at the altar beside his friend, Quintus Quexel, and saw him go through the ceremony which made Mercedes Corona his wife; and it was Nick Carter who gave the bride away.

"I have never taken much stock in the theory of reincarnation," he said to Alicia, as they were leaving the church, a little later, "but, if there is any foundation for the belief, the case of Mercedes and Quintus is surely an instance of it."

Alicia looked up at him, and smiled. Then she said:

"At all events, it is love—and, after all, Mr. Carter, what more is needed?"

"Nothing more," replied Nick. "Love is everything."

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 450, will contain "Missing—A Sack of Gold; or, Nick Carter and the Express Office Mystery."

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